

## Aberystwyth University

### *A desistance-led approach to youth justice*

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# **A desistance-led approach to youth justice**

**Dr Kathy Hampson**

# Desistance is...

- Stopping offending for a period of time (primary desistance)

which includes...

- reduction in seriousness
- reduction in frequency
- Complete stopping of offending due to a young person seeing themselves as a non-offender (secondary desistance)

Exercise:

What I *don't* want you to think about...



So...

What are you thinking  
about?!



How can we get young people to  
stop offending....

...when we insist on reminding  
them about their offending?

# Desistance requires...

- New personal narrative
  - this is playing the long game for permanent change, rather than short term change to make us feel successful!
- Social capital.



# Achieved through...

- Supportive relationship with a worker *who believes they can change*
- Building on young people's strengths, and helping them to construct their preferred self (build hope)...and future (goals)
- Helping them learn to overcome obstacles and meeting their (real) needs
- Facilitating their integration into society on all levels (and encouraging other factors found to support desistance)

**...INSTEAD of offence focused, risk-led working**



# Four stage change process

- General openness to change
- Key turning points or 'hooks for change'
- The development of an appealing/conventional 'replacement self'
- Change in attitude towards deviant and/or criminal behaviours

(Giordano, P. C., Cernkovich, S. A., & Rudolph, J. L. (2002). Gender, crime, and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 990-1064)



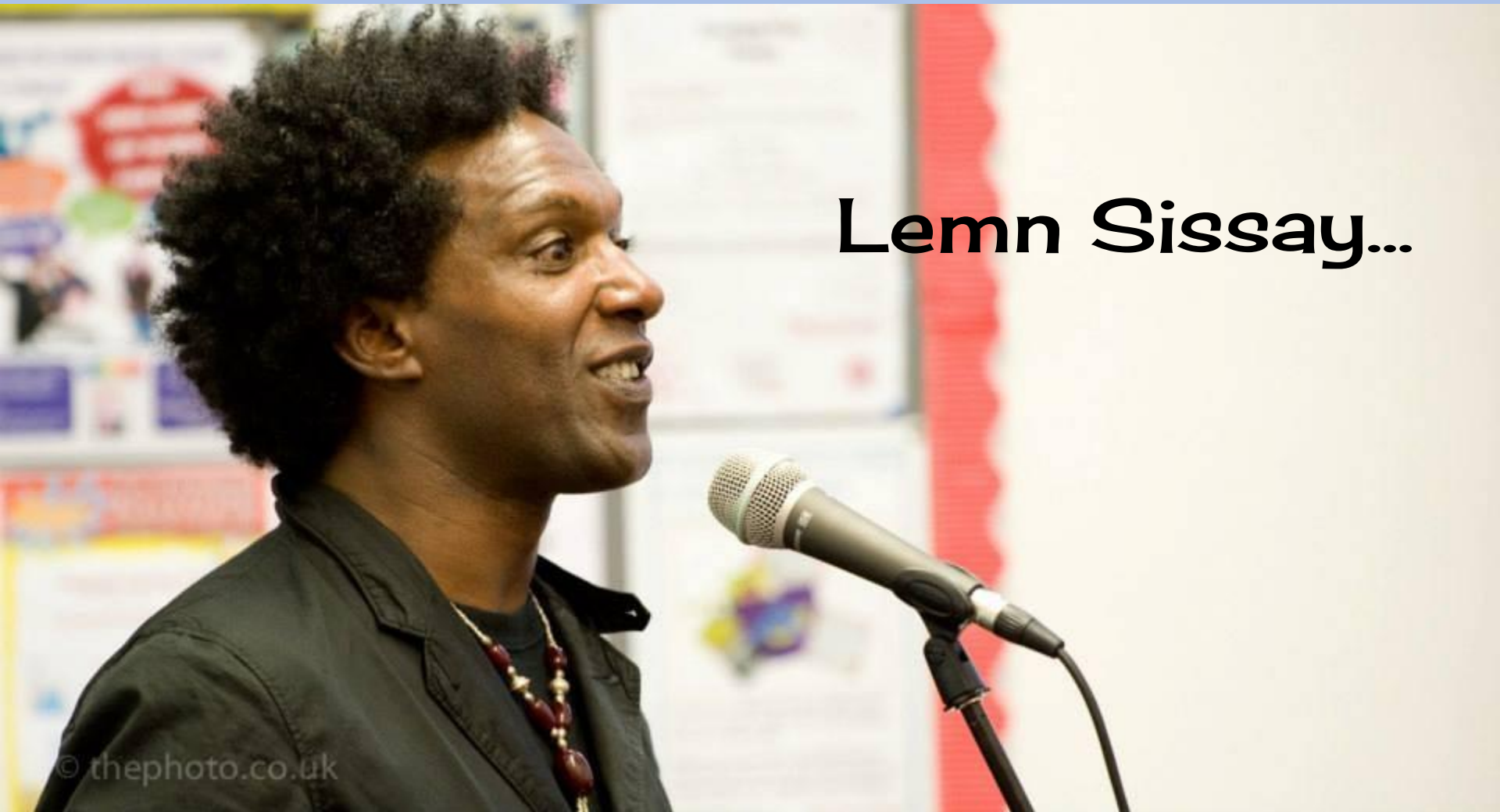
# Difficulties...

- Desistance can be a lengthy process of which we are unlikely to see the end result
- During the desistance process there **will** be relapse
- It is necessarily a process which is run at the young person's pace because it is about their story (and therefore utterly individual)
- So...it has to be something which is collaborative, not 'done to' them
- Social structures (and the language of criminal justice) often mitigate against secondary desistance ...and none of this addresses that!



Unrelenting negativity...

**Lemn Sissay...**

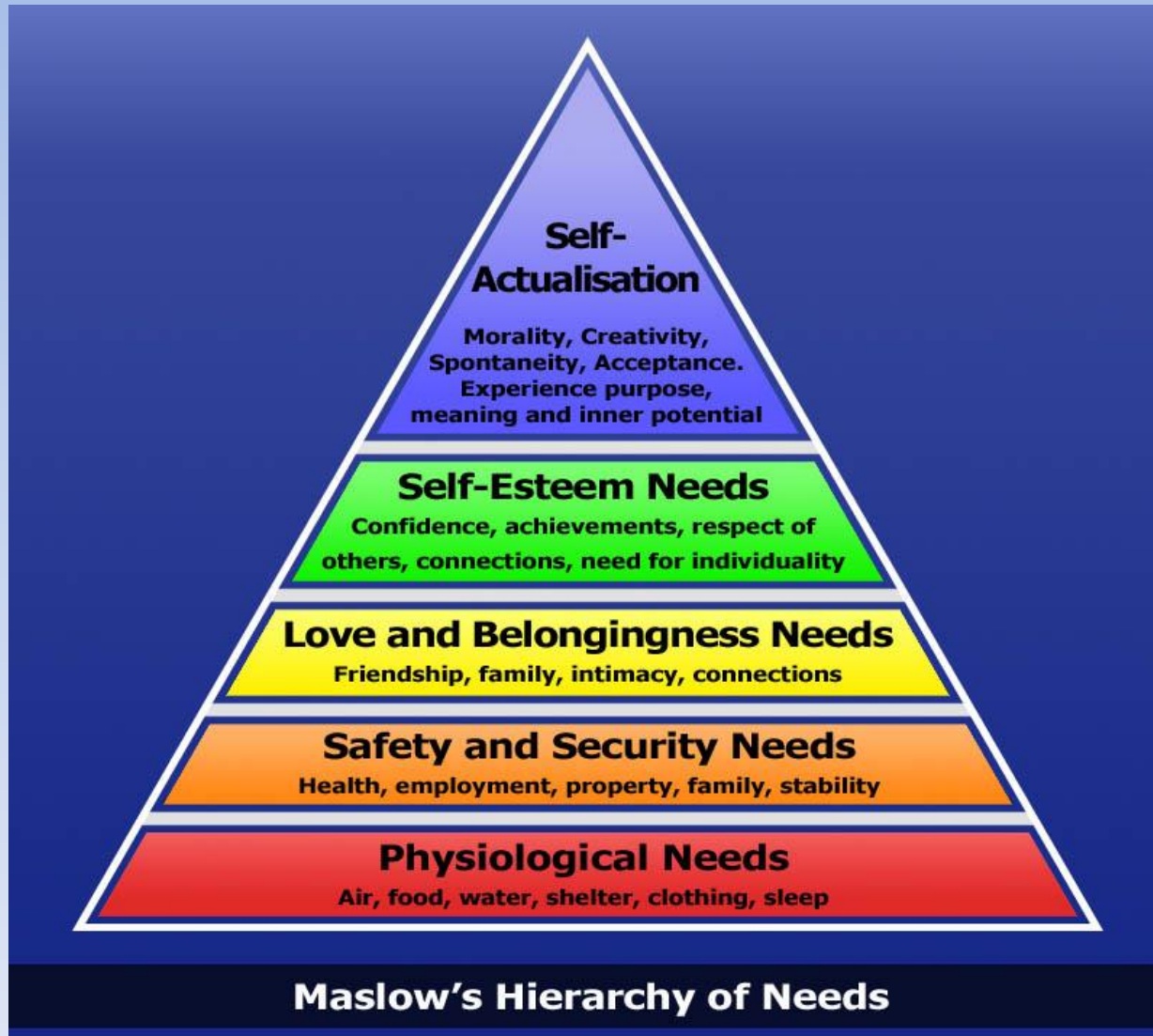


# Unrelenting negativity...

"At my children's home there were about 20 red squares on the walls that said 'in emergencies don't break the glass'. We all came from traumatised backgrounds into this situation, and we didn't break the glass. And we were never congratulated for that. Every single day somebody should have hugged us and said: there's twenty adolescents here, all of whom are traumatised, who have come into a building with twenty blatant red boxes which say 'in emergencies don't break the glass', and we didn't break the glass, and nobody congratulated us - because they were waiting for us to break it, because the moment we break the glass everybody knows what to do. Firstly, we must establish the facts, because it's no use to anybody unless we've been naughty, we've broken the rules. Then we're happy. We're all happy, we all know what to do. I'm going to be punished in some way. And everybody knows what to do, and reports got filled, and we're on to the next situation. Nobody congratulated us for not breaking the glass".

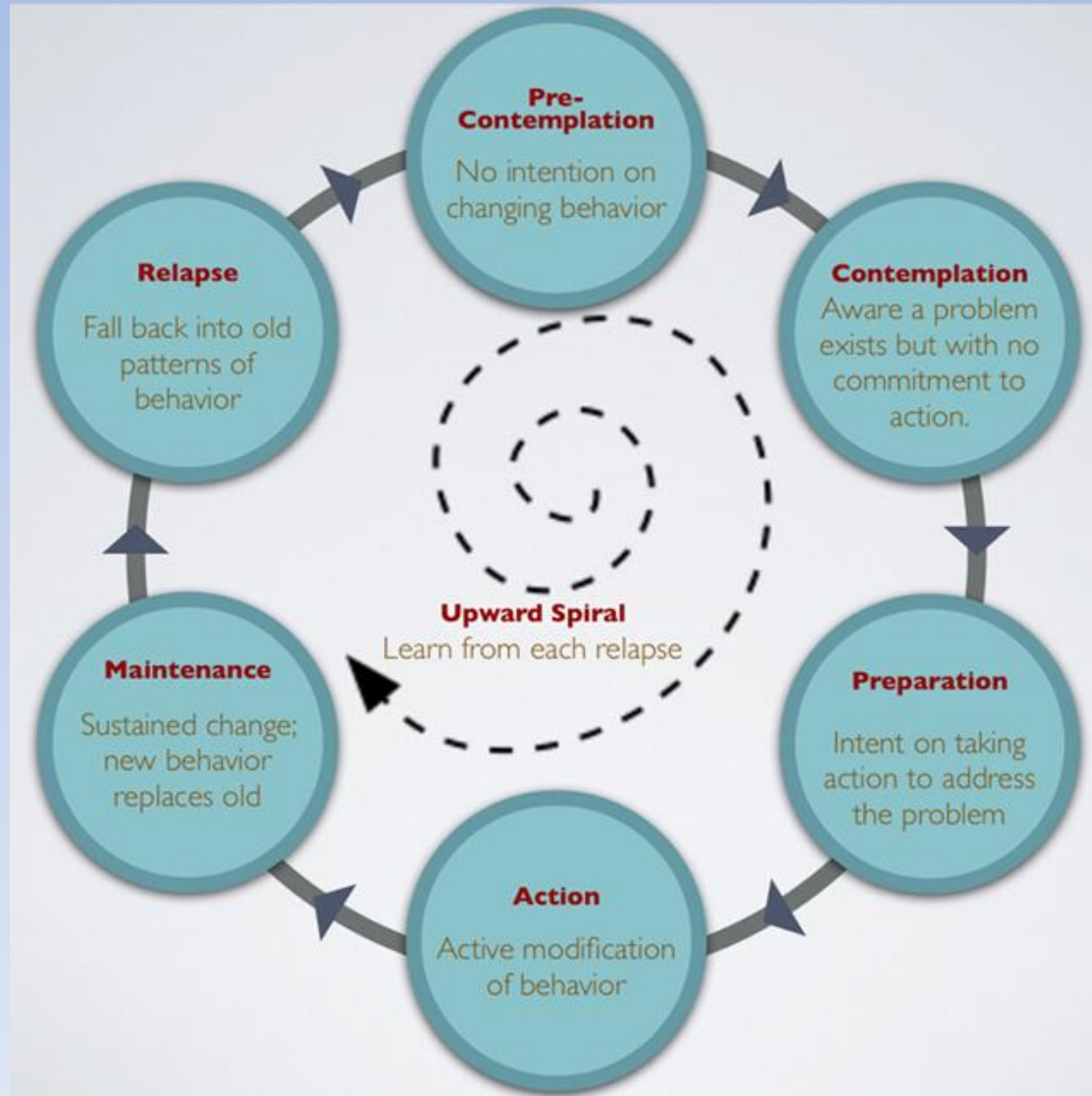
**Lemn Sissay** (Llana Impact Event, 2015)

# Two important background theories:





# Two important background theories:





Thinking about it



Planning it



Not interested



Doing it



Give up or start again?



Had enough

The  
cycle  
of  
change



‘Another dimension of desistance concerns the relationship between the individual and society. Sampson and Laub (1993) developed the notion of a bond between an individual and society. The bond is made up of the extent to which an individual has emotional attachments to societal goals, is committed to achieving them through legitimate means, believes these goals to be worthy, and is able to involve themselves in the attainment of such goals.’ (McNeill et al, 2012)



- Maslow's pyramid may not be exactly hierarchical...
- Young people will strive to meet their own needs however they can ...by definition, committing crime has met some of these needs
- Young people have to be able to visualise a different way to meet these needs
- Need to know where they are going and what their destination is (what does it look like?); ie: personal goals
- They have to be believed in ...or they will give up
- **Relapse is a necessary part of the process, not a failure.**



An important question....

NOT what people are desisting  
from

...but what are they desisting to?



# **Desistance - A case study in practice: personal goals**

Fitzpatrick E, McGuire J, and Dickson J (2015)  
'Personal Goals of Adolescents in a Youth  
Offending Service in the United Kingdom'.  
*Youth Justice* Vol. 15(2) 166– 181

# The development of future goals...

- Helps form identity
- Enables the construction of a mental action plan
- Thinking into the future – connected with emotional wellbeing and personality development
- Short term focus – connected with emotional distress and hopelessness
- But goals need to be achievable
- ...criminal activity is goal-driven!
- Goal-type depends on the desired future self



# The development of future goals...

- Strain theory – difficulty meeting pro-social aspirations, so commit crime to deal with unmet hopes/needs
- They do not perceive goals likely to be achieved
- Talking about the future with young people – ‘institutional compulsion’ (scripted responses)
- Uncertainty about achieving goal aspirations leads to self-protective behaviours
- Feelings of powerlessness and victimisation impact negatively on aspirations



# The development of future goals...

- Action plans more likely to contain things to stop/avoid, rather than positive steps
- Uncertainty over success causes ambivalence
- ‘inevitability of failure’ = lack of goal aspirations
- Self-protection behaviours – devaluing the goals, delay in committing to goals, displaced responsibility (others’ fault!)



# The development of future goals...

‘avoiding commitment to goals, minimizing the importance of idealized goal aspirations, portraying oneself as ambivalent about the future, and delaying the process of thinking about future goals were adaptive processes for these young people in attempts to preserve their emotional well-being and sense of self’

(Fitzpatrick, McGuire, and Dickson, 2015)





# So what is the answer?

- Discussions undertaken at the young person's pace so that meaningful goal aspirations are identified
- Appropriate support identified and provided to enable the young person to engage in personally meaningful goal pursuit
- Practitioners provide young people with a sense of hope to decrease experienced uncertainty
- **Professionals need to gain a meaningful understanding of the young person's goal aspirations, desired futures, feelings about the future, resources available and perceived barriers from their perspective.**

# **Desistance - a case study in practice: desistance approach with youth**

Nugent B (2014) Reaching the hardest  
to reach. *Youth Justice*.

First published online 4/12/14



# Particular difficulties with...

- All Young men 'on the cusp of adulthood' (powerless and position-less)
- Disadvantaged
- Custody leavers
- Support 'was regarded as something 'men' did not do'
- Young adults over-represented in custody
- Short term prisoners



# ‘Moving On Service’

- In Scotland
- Multiagency partnership (lead agency Action for Children)
- Young people aged 16 to 21
- Five agreed goals:
  - Substance use reduction
  - Improved relationships with family/significant others
  - Increased access to community support
  - Sustain suitable accommodation
  - Reduce offending behaviour

# Sound familiar?!



# Now for the differences!

## ‘Youth work’ model

*‘to enable young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society, and to reach their full potential’ (Lifelong Learning UK, 2008)*

- Person centred
- Solution focused
- Help young people meet their need
- Help young people identify their strengths and actively promote them
- Building relationships
- Friendly, informal, 'acting with integrity to help engagement' (Smith, 2002)
- Belief that the young person can change for the good
- Establish short and long term goals



- Identified while in prison
- Optional
- Met by key worker until release
- Purposeful lack of use of paper/pens...just talked to them (mostly 18 months)
- Contact was for as long as was needed
- Drop-in office *for them to use* (internet etc) ‘to access both the emotional and practical’
- *‘the service treated them as a whole person rather than a litany of needs’.*





‘When I first came out of prison I found it difficult even sitting and eating in McDonalds’ and my worker really helped me to build confidence to be able to do such things again’.



- Young people commented on a different approach which encouraged the identification of strengths
- Participants moved towards a 'positive self-identity' (cognitive transformation)
- Encouragement of workers – turning point
- Entitled to a better life
- Sometimes the only positive message (all others through life having been negative – more work to do on this in prevention?).

# So...did it work?

- Reduction in re-imprisonment rate (27%...58%)
- 78% improved well-being (inc ↓ substance use)
- 92% improved relationships with family, friends, community
- 90% increased access to community support
- 88% suitable accommodation (inc support)



# Why did it work?

What the young people said...:

- Relationship between worker and young person at heart of the intervention ('They never looked at me and saw me as an offender, they were able to see past that')
- Honesty and candour
- Personalised plans (short/long term goals)
- Overcoming practical and mental barriers
- 'Dogged determination and persistence of workers'



- Creating a safe and welcoming space
- ‘Getting things done’
- Empathy in action (fruit and food always available)
- Creating opportunities
- Sustaining motivation
- The ability to connect
- Work Fun Balance (*engagement involves empowerment – in control of plans; giving back*)
- ‘In it together’ (desistance can be lonely!).



‘this age group has particular needs but also that each person is different and therefore having an individualised approach’

‘helping ‘offenders’ to move past offending means dropping the label of ‘offender’ and seeing the person and their potential instead, which undoubtedly means adopting a less risk adverse approach’



# ‘Child first offender second’ approach\*

- Contact with the youth justice system is ‘iatrogenic’!
- CFOS ‘positive behaviours and outcomes as the primary targets’ rather than ‘avoiding negativity, deficit, risk and harm’
  - Child-friendly and child-appropriate
  - Legitimate to children
  - Diversionary
  - Prevention as inclusionary
  - Evidence-based partnership
  - Systems management
  - Partnership with the State
  - Responsibilising adults

\*Case S. & Haines K. (2014) Children First, Offenders Second - Positive Promotion: Reframing the Prevention Debate. *Youth Justice*. First published December 14



# ‘Child first offender second’ approach

What does this look like in practice?

*‘there is (and will remain) considerable scope for practitioners to use their professional judgement and discretion in developing practice that is coincident with CFOS’ (Case & Haines, 2014)*

General principles of:

- **Perceived as legitimate/fair**
- Fully participatory
- Engaging

*Young people perceiving contact with authorities to be fair, will participate and engage...*

